

VZCZCXRO1003  
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHLB #0134/01 0331602  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 021602Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4123  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3421  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3626  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000134

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF COMMANDER TELLS CODEL SMITH  
EXTREMISTS ON THE RUN

REF: BEIRUT 0108

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.  
4 (b) and (d)

#### Summary

1. (C) Highlighting the fight against Islamic extremists, Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Jean Kahwagi told Codel Smith that the LAF had "changed the game" in its fight against terrorism in Lebanon by taking a more offensive approach. Kahwagi stressed that Islamic extremists had gained their fighting experience in Iraq and then come to Lebanon. He reiterated that the LAF needed newer and more lethal weaponry to continue to improve its fighting capabilities. He believed that there is better cooperation with Syria on securing the borders, and communicated the importance of the U.S. talking to Iran and Syria if the U.S. wanted to move forward on developing stability in the region. He noted that "perhaps" Hizballah would evolve into a purely political entity, but it is still perceived by many in Lebanon as a legitimate resistance force against Israeli invasions. End summary

2. (C) Codel Smith, accompanied by Ambassador and EmbOffs, met with LAF Commander Jean Kahwagi January 30 at the LAF HQ. Codel members were House Armed Services Committee members Adam Smith (D-WA), Susan Davis (D-CA), Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), Glynn Nye (D-VA) and Frank Kratovil (D-MD); C.A.Dutch Ruppersberger (D-MD) from the House Select Committee on Intelligence and Ted Poe (R-TX) of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

#### A BETTER WORLD WITH A STRONGER LAF

3. (C) Kahwagi said the LAF had "changed the game" against Islamic extremists like Fatah al-Islam (FAI) by using better intelligence and offensive tactics. He stressed that the LAF had forced 20 to 50 members of FAI into hiding, most likely in the Palestinian camp Ain al-Hilweh, and if the LAF caught them, then "secrets will open up" concerning other terror groups' activities. Kahwagi believed extremist fighters had gained experience in Iraq, and after the U.S. "succeeded" in Iraq, the fighters came to Lebanon, where they believed they could hide in the Palestinian camps and the army could not pursue them.

14. (C) To strengthen the LAF, Kahwagi prioritized his needs for equipment modernization: fixed wing aircraft and attack helicopters, extensive training for Special Forces units, and training for intelligence operations. He expressed gratitude for on-going U.S. and European Union assistance, but said the whole world would benefit if the LAF had more and better equipment with which to fight terrorists.

SYRIA: GIVE'EM A CHANCE  
-----

15. (C) Kahwagi called his 2008 visit to Damascus and Defense Minister Murr's January 28 visit (reftel) as "positive." He believed Syria would be cooperative in border security and noted that Syria and Lebanon agreed to deploy more forces to the border to combat human trafficking and arms smuggling.

16. (C) Asked about Iran, Kahwagi opined that perhaps Syria would find an improved relationship with the U.S an "alternative" to forging ties with Iran. Kahwagi enthusiastically stated, "You must talk to them (the Syrians and Iranians) if you want a clearer picture, and you'll find they'll be very open to you."

HIZBALLAH: A FACE OF SOCIETY  
-----

17. (C) Rep. Davis pressed Kahwagi on Hizballah. Kahwagi responded that he could not ascertain Hizballah's numbers because its membership co-exists with regular citizens of general Lebanese society. In response to a question, Kahwagi

BEIRUT 00000134 002 OF 002

said that if the LAF attempted to recruit Hizballah members to join the national defense force, he was unsure they would join. Kahwagi responded to several inquiries on attitudes towards Hizballah within Lebanese society with historical anecdotes of its fight against Israel. He seemed pessimistic that Hizballah would ever give up its military activities and become purely a political party.

COMMENT  
-----

8 (C) Kahwagi was in better form than in previous meetings with members of Congress in which he showed obvious discomfort with what he saw as political, policy-oriented questions about Hizballah. He strongly advocated with the HASC-dominated Codel for specific items of military assistance, and spoke with conviction that the LAF had an advantage over terrorists in Lebanon. End Comment.  
SISON